Brazilian leader sends in army to fight fires; Protesters around world have urged Bolsonaro to step up battle against blazes in Amazon

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Under increasing international pressure to contain fires sweeping parts of the Amazon, Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro on Friday authorized use of the military to battle the massive blazes.

Brazilian forces will deploy starting Saturday to border areas, Indigenous territories and other affected regions in the Amazon to assist in putting out fires for a month, according to a presidential decree.

The armed forces will collaborate with public security and environmental protection agencies, the decree says.

"The protection of the forest is our duty," the president said. "We are aware of that and will act to combat deforestation and criminal activities that put people at risk in the Amazon. We are a government of zero tolerance for crime, and in the environmental field it will not be different."

Bolsonaro has previously described rainforest protections as an obstacle to economic development, sparring with critics who note that the Amazon produces vast amounts of oxygen and is considered crucial in efforts to contain global warming.

An Associated Press journalist who travelled to the Amazon region on Friday saw many already deforested areas that had been burned.

Charred trees and fallen branches were seen around Porto Velho, the capital of Rondonia state, which borders Bolivia. In some instances, the burned fields were adjacent to intact livestock ranches and other farms, suggesting the fires had been managed as part of a land-clearing policy.

Small numbers of demonstrators gathered outside Brazilian diplomatic missions in Paris, London, Geneva and Bogota, Colombia, to urge Brazil to do more to fight the fires. Larger protests were held in Uruguay and Argentina. Hundreds also protested in Chile, Ecuador and Peru.

Neighbouring Bolivia and Paraguay have also struggled to contain fires that swept through woods and fields and, in many cases, were set to clear land for farming.

Close to 20 per cent of the Amazon has already been deforested, according to Thomas Lovejoy, a George Mason University environmental scientist.

Fires are common in Brazil in the annual dry season, but they are much more widespread this year. Brazilian state experts reported nearly 77,000 wildfires across the country so far this year, up 85 per cent over the same period in 2018.

Some Canadian environment groups are urging Prime Minister Justin Trudeau to put the brakes on attempts to seal a free-trade agreement with Brazil until stronger policies to protect the Amazon rainforest are in place.

Trudeau landed Friday in Biarritz for the G7 talks between the world's wealthiest developed economies, which are now the subject of an expected emergency session.

In escalating tension over the fires, France, the summit host, threatened to block a European Union trade deal with several South American states, including Brazil. Ireland joined in the threat.

The spectre of possible economic repercussions for Brazil and its South American neighbours show how the Amazon is becoming a battleground between Bolsonaro and western governments alarmed that vast swathes of the region are going up in smoke on his watch.

The Amazon supplies one-fifth of the Earth's oxygen and is home to one-fifth of its fresh water and half of all insect, plant and animal species. The rainforest is also a substantial carbon sink, absorbing at least one billion tonnes of carbon dioxide every year.

Catherine Abreu, executive director of Climate Action Network Canada, said Canada needs "to halt negotiations on the Mercosur trade deal until Brazil puts meaningful policies in place to protect the Amazon."

"One in every five breaths we breathe is produced in the Amazon. The Amazon is the heartbeat of the global hydrological cycle. Ecosystems worldwide will quite literally collapse if we fail to protect this incredible place."

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